

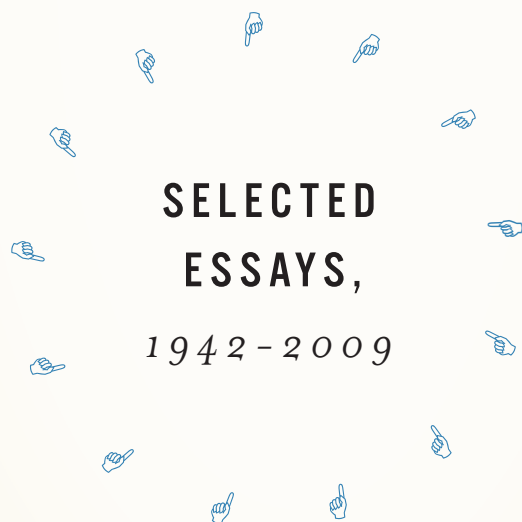
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**NEOCONSERVATIVE**

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**PERSUASION**



IRVING KRISTOL

# THE NEOCONSERVATIVE PERSUASION



# The Neoconservative Persuasion

*Selected Essays,  
1942–2009*

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IRVING KRISTOL

*Edited by*  
Gertrude Himmelfarb

*Foreword by*  
William Kristol

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New York

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Designed by Brent Wilcox

The Library of Congress has catalogued the print edition of this book as follows:  
Kristol, Irving.

The neoconservative persuasion : selected essays, 1942–2009 / by Irving Kristol ;  
edited by Gertrude Himmelfarb ; foreword by William Kristol.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-0-465-02223-6 (alk. paper)

1. Conservatism. 2. Conservatism—United States. I. Himmelfarb, Gertrude.

II. Title.

JC573.K6658 2010

320.520973—dc22

2010038251

E-book ISBN: 978-0-465-02333-2

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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FOREWORD: IN MEMORIAM:  
IRVING KRISTOL,  
1920–2009

In 1994 my father wrote a piece for the *Wall Street Journal* titled “Life Without Father.” It dealt with the subject of the family and poverty and welfare—with my father drawing for his argument, as he so often did, on a combination of social science, common sense, history, and personal experience. In the course of the article, my father briefly discussed his father, Joseph Kristol, who, he wrote, “was thought by all our relatives and his fellow workers to be wise, and fair, and good. I thought so too.”

So have Liz and I always thought about our father. To us, he was wise, and fair, and good. I honestly don’t think it ever occurred to us that we could have had a better father. So as we enter the rest of our life—a life without our father—we are overwhelmed not by a sense of loss or grief, though of course we feel both, but by a sense of gratitude: Having Irving Kristol as our dad was our great good fortune.

Now, my father would often speak of his own great good fortune. That was meeting my mother. Shortly after graduating from City College, my father—a diligent if already somewhat heterodox Trotskyist—was assigned to attend the meetings of a Brooklyn branch of the young Trotskyists. As my father later wrote, the meetings were farcical and pointless, as they were intended to recruit the proletarian youths of Bensonhurst to a cause they were much too sensible to take seriously. But the meetings turned out not to be entirely pointless, because my father met my mother there. They were married, and they remained happily married—truly happily married, thoroughly happily married—for the next sixty-seven years.

Dan Bell, who knew my parents for that whole span, called my parents’ marriage “the best marriage of [his] generation.” I only knew my parents for

fifty-six years, so I can't speak with Dan's authority—and my first couple of years with my parents are something of a blur. But I know enough confidently to endorse his judgment.

During the 1960s and 1970s, when Liz and I were growing up, everything is supposed to have become complicated and conflicted and ambiguous. Not so with respect to my parents' love for each other. Or with respect to the love and admiration that Liz and I—and later, Caleb and Susan—had for my father. Our love for him was always straightforward, unambivalent, and unconditional.

As was the love of his five grandchildren for him. And as was his love for them. Almost seven years ago, my father was scheduled for lung surgery. As we were talking the night before, my father matter-of-factly acknowledged the possibility he might not survive. And, he said, he could have no complaints if that were to happen. "I've had such a lucky life," he remarked. (Actually, I'm editing a bit since we're in a house of worship. He said, "I've had such a god-damn lucky life.")

But, he said, it would be just great to get another five years—in order to see the grandchildren grow up. That wish of his was granted. He got almost seven years. So he was able to see Rebecca and Anne and Joe graduate from college. He was able to attend Rebecca and Elliot's wedding. He—a staff sergeant in the army in World War II—developed a renewed interest in things military as Joe trained to be, and then was commissioned as, a second lieutenant in the Marine Corps.

And he was able to see Liz's children grow up too, to watch Max and Katy become poised and impressive teenagers—it turns out that's not a contradiction in terms. My father was able to get to know them, and to talk with them, in a way you can't with much younger kids. So that too was a great source of happiness.

Everyone knows of my father's good nature and good humor. He kept that to the end. In the last couple of years, his hearing loss—and the limitations of even the most modern hearing aid technology—sometimes made it difficult for him to understand everything that was being said in a noisy restaurant or a busy place. But he compensated. A few months ago, my parents were out for brunch with the Stelzers and the Krauthammers. After a stretch where he couldn't quite pick up some exchanges between Irwin and Charles, my dad said to the two of them: "I can't hear what you're saying. So I make it up. And," he added, smiling, "sometimes you disappoint me."

But my father was in general not the disappointed sort. It's true that he loved dogs and never had one. But he made up for that by doting on his two

granddogs—Liz and Caleb’s Sandy, and of course Patches, whom he saw more of because of our proximity. Patches really loved my father—and as many of you know, Patches is choosy in his affections.

Just a day or so before he slipped from consciousness last week, my father was greeted by one of those well-trained dogs that visit hospitals, in this case a big golden retriever. He patted it and communed with it for a while. Then, as the owner led the dog away, my father commented to us, as if for the ages—“dogs are noble creatures.”

My father liked humans too—though I’m not sure he thought they quite rose to the level of dogs as noble creatures. Still, as I look around today, I do wish my father could be here, because he would have so enjoyed seeing and talking with all of you.

In one of the many, many e-mails and notes I’ve gotten in the last few days, a friend commented, “When I’d stop by the *Public Interest* office in the 1980s, your dad would always start a conversation with, ‘How’s the family?’ I suppose that was his standard opener. But I noticed in the last few years, when I’d see him at AEI or somewhere else in D.C., he’d ask about ‘the family’ and then ‘how’s everyone?’ If I mentioned some former *PI* editor or writer, he’d beam—as if it were news of his own extended family.”

My father’s extended family ended up being pretty large. In politics and law and business and journalism, in New York and Washington and elsewhere, even in the strange outposts of modern academe, there are scores, legions—hordes they must seem to those who disapprove of them—who have been influenced, and not just casually, by my father.

How did he do it? I do think that in my father was found an unusual combination of traits—confidence without arrogance; worldly wisdom along with intellectual curiosity; a wry wit and a kindly disposition; and a clear-eyed realism about the world along with a great generosity of spirit. He very much enjoyed his last two decades in Washington, but he had none of the self-importance that afflicts us here. He loved intellectual pursuits, but always shunned intellectual pretension. For example, I don’t think I ever heard him use the phrase “the life of the mind,” though my father lived a life of the mind.

Beneath the confident wit and the intellectual bravado, my father had a deep modesty. My father spoke with gratitude of his good fortune in life. He wouldn’t have claimed to deserve the honors that came his way—though he did deserve them.

Perhaps in part because he was a man who was marked by such a deep sense of gratitude, he was the recipient of much deeply felt gratitude. Even I’ve been

surprised, judging by the e-mails and phone calls since his death, by the sheer number of those befriended by my father, by the range of those affected by him, by the diversity of those who admired him. I expected the appropriate remarks from distinguished political leaders and professors, and we were moved by eloquent testimonials from people who've known my father well, in some cases for many decades. But what struck all of us in the family were the e-mails from individuals who met my father only once or twice, but who remembered his kindness or benefited from his counsel—or from people who had never met him, but who were still very much influenced by his writing or other enterprises he was involved in.

For example, this, from a young Capitol Hill aide: “Your father was one of the first people I met, totally by accident, when I went to work at AEI a few years ago. And I will always remember how incredibly gracious and kind he was toward me, an utterly clueless research assistant.” Or this, an e-mail forwarded by one of our kids: “Sorry to hear about your grandfather. He was ahead of his time and provided the intellectual underpinnings for the only conservative kid in his Jewish youth group in Tulsa, Oklahoma.” Of all the communications my mother and my sister and I have received, I suspect my father might have gotten a particular kick out of that one.

Leon Kass said to me last week, after a final visit to my father, “It’s hard to imagine a world without Irving Kristol.” So it is. But as Leon would be the first to say, we’re not left simply with a world without Irving Kristol. It’s true that his death leaves the world a poorer place. But it’s a world made richer by the life he lived and the legacy he leaves.

*William Kristol*

Funeral service

Congregation Adas Israel

Washington, D.C.

September 22, 2009

## INTRODUCTION

The memoir by my husband introducing his last volume of essays in 1995, *Neoconservatism: The Autobiography of an Idea*, opens with a typical Irving Kristol quip.

Is there such a thing as a “neo” gene? I ask that question because, looking back over a lifetime of my opinions, I am struck by the fact that they all qualify as “neo.” I have been a neo-Marxist, a neo-Trotskyist, a neo-socialist, a neoliberal, and finally a neoconservative. It seems that no ideology or philosophy has ever been able to encompass all of reality to my satisfaction. There was always a degree of detachment qualifying my commitment.

That memoir does not mention the earliest manifestation in print of that “neo” gene. Rummaging among old files shortly after his death in September 2009, I came upon a couple of small tattered magazines entitled *Enquiry: A Journal of Independent Radical Thought*. Started by my husband and some of our fellow-exiles from Trotskyism, this was the first of several magazines he helped found; it lasted little more than two years, for a total of eight issues, by which time he and most of the other contributors were in the army. (Later, when an enthusiastic young person came to him with an idea, he was likely to say, “Start a magazine.”) My penciled note on the cover of my copy of the first issue, dated November 1942, identified the author of one of the articles, William Ferry, as Irving Kristol. (William Ferry was his “party name” in his brief Trotskyist period in college). The other issue, dated April 1944, required no such identification; here the author was Irving Kristol.

Rereading those articles now is illuminating, both for what they tell us about his thinking in those early years and for what they portend about

neoconservatism itself. "The Quality of Doubt" in the first issue is a review of W. H. Auden's book of poetry *The Double Man*. It opens with the now-famous quotation from the poem, written on the eve of the war, about the thirties, that "low dishonest decade," and goes on to describe the "growing doubts" and "undercurrent of questioning uncertainty" in Auden's later poetry. Those doubts and uncertainty had an obvious political source, Auden's disillusionment with Stalinism. But it is the poet's pervasive moral tone, his sense of the "moral vacancy" of that troubled age, that impresses the reviewer—a "moral subtlety, receptivity, and sensitivity [that] is close to brilliant."

"The Moral Critic" in a later issue of *Enquiry*, a review of Lionel Trilling's book about E. M. Forster, is almost entirely on Trilling, Forster entering late in the review almost as an afterthought. It is also less about Trilling's book on Forster than about an earlier essay by him on T. S. Eliot's *Idea of a Christian Society*, and more particularly about the critique of radicalism and liberalism that Trilling found in that essay—a critique that he (and the reviewer) entirely shared. Abandoning their traditional moral vision by permitting means to prevail over ends and having a simplistic faith in their ability to change human nature, the radicals betrayed, Trilling wrote, "a kind of disgust with humanity as it is and a perfect faith in humanity as it is to be." That attitude, he said, derived from a liberalism that was smug and self-righteous, preferring not to know that "the good will generates its own problems, that the love of humanity has its own vices and the love of truth its own insensibilities." For the reviewer, this was the characteristic, and altogether commendable, mode of all of Trilling's work, a "moral realism" that amounted to nothing less than a "brilliant and sustained, if sometimes impatient, exploration of the complexities of moral perfection and of the paths thereto."

In 1942, when my husband wrote the first of these articles, he was all of twenty-two and two years out of college where he had majored in history (after a brief foray in mathematics) and minored, so to speak (in the Trotskyist alcove at City College), in Marxism, post-Marxism, and anti-Marxism. He was now working as a machinist in the Brooklyn Navy Yard awaiting his induction into the army—altogether an unlikely initiation, one might think, into the world of poetry and literary criticism. Yet even as a neo-Trotskyist, he had been more "neo" than most of his comrades, for while he was engaging in disputes about the Marxist dialectic or the prospects of international revolution, he was also reading the fashionable "modernist" writers—his memoir mentions D. H. Lawrence, T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, Franz Kafka—and was entering the New York intellectual world by way of *Partisan Review*, the preeminent "little magazine" of the time. It was in *PR*, in 1940, that he read Trilling's

essay on Eliot, the first of many of Trilling's essays that, he later recalled, "hit me with the force of a revelation."

It is against this background that the founding of *Enquiry* (which may have been inspired, on a very much smaller scale, by *Partisan Review*) may be understood. Yet even then, and in that congenial circle, Kristol was conspicuously a "neo." The subtitle of *Enquiry*, "A Journal of Independent Radical Thought," does not capture how "independent" he was, not only in regard to the writers he chose to write about (his were the only pieces in *Enquiry* on literary subjects) but also in his appreciation of the moral sensibility and complexity he found in them. Half a century later, in the preface to *Neoconservatism*, he expressed his surprise upon finding, in essays on a wide variety of subjects and written over a long span of time (the first essay in that volume dates from 1949), the "homogeneity of approach, the consistency of a certain cast of mind." He would have been even more surprised had he reread those still earlier *Enquiry* articles, which might have been written, with perhaps only the smallest emendations, at any point in his career.

His memoir emphasizes another aspect of the neo gene—his abiding interest in and respect for religion. This too is evident in those early articles, in his praise of the "religiosity of tone" in Auden's poems and, in the Trilling essay, of the "religio-ethical tone" of such other critics of radicalism as Jacques Maritain, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Christopher Dawson. Another essay, "A Christian Experiment," is a sympathetic although not uncritical account of a novel by Ignazio Silone about the hero's evolution from "revolutionary Marxian politics to a libertarian revolutionary Christianity." And "Other People's Nerve" is, among other things, a rebuke to Sidney Hook for dismissing too cavalierly the religious "heretics" who were defecting from the supposedly "scientific" irreligion of the Left.

That religious neo gene emerged most conspicuously in *Commentary* a few years later. Kristol's first article, in September 1947 (the very month he came on the staff), "The Myth of the Supra-Human Jew," is a learned exploration of the idea, for good and bad, of "the chosen people," quoting not only from Jacques Maritain but also from Raïssa Maritain and such other French theologians as Léon Bloy, Ernest Renan, and Charles Péguy—not the usual authorities cited in *Commentary* (or even *Partisan Review*). His next article, four months later, was on more familiar terrain. "How Basic Is 'Basic Judaism'" is a critique of a conception of Judaism so "basic" as to deny, he thought, the very essence of Judaism. Other essays followed, on Christianity as well as Judaism. Because he was the only editor interested in religion—this in a Jewish magazine—he became the *de facto* religious editor. But here



too, as his memoir testifies, his neo gene prevailed, for he was then, as he remained, “a nonobservant Jew, but not a nonreligious one”—indeed, a “neo-orthodox” Jew.

It was in *Commentary* that yet another neo-ism revealed itself. As Trilling, the “skeptical liberal,” was the dominant influence upon Kristol in the 1940s, so Leo Strauss, the “skeptical conservative,” was in the 1950s. And as Trilling’s essays had struck him as a “revelation,” so Strauss’s *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, in 1952, produced “the kind of intellectual shock that is a once-in-a-lifetime experience.” In both cases what impressed him was not so much their political views (which were more implicit than overt), but the mind-set that informed their views of culture, religion, society, philosophy, and politics alike. His review of *Persecution and the Art of Writing* focuses on Maimonides as the exemplar of Strauss’s major themes: the relation of the esoteric and the exoteric, of reason and revelation, of philosophy and the polity. It concludes by commending Strauss for accomplishing “nothing less than a revolution in intellectual history” by recalling us to the “wisdom of the past.”

The English journal *Encounter*, founded with Stephen Spender the following year, displayed a breadth of interest and receptivity to ideas that transcended party, class, and national lines. An important intellectual and political force in the Cold War period—an antidote to the communism that was still attracting many liberals as well as radicals—it served as a model for similar magazines on the Continent and abroad. It was also an education for Kristol, introducing him to a culture and polity different from but wonderfully congruent with that of America. He returned to the States in 1958, first as the editor of *The Reporter* and then at the publishing house Basic Books, with an enriched sense of the Anglo-American tradition and historic “relationship.”

The “neo” disposition took on a more political and economic character with the founding in 1965 of *The Public Interest*, co-edited first with Daniel Bell and then with Nathan Glazer. The “quality of doubt,” the “questioning,” “uncertainty,” and “sharp, cynical analysis” that had been so provocative in Auden’s poetry reappear, more prosaically, in a journal that was ever doubting, questioning, and sharply, even cynically, analytic of social policies and reformers. So, too, Trilling’s observations about the simplistic, self-righteous liberals, who do not know that “good will” and “love of humanity” generate their own problems and vices, are echoed in *The Public Interest*’s repeated invocation of the principle of unanticipated consequences. And Trilling’s critique of the liberal reformers of his generation was all too applicable to a later generation of reformers, chastised in *The Public Interest*, who were intent upon waging a “War on Poverty” in the name of “the Great Society.”

For Kristol, this mode of thought—questioning, skeptical, ironic, yet “cheerfully pessimistic,” as he said—soon evolved into “neoconservatism,” a label invented by others as a pejorative term that he happily adopted for himself. Again, there were reminiscences of the past, as in the title he gave *Two Cheers for Capitalism* in 1978, recalling Forster’s “two cheers for democracy,” which he had cited in his essay on Trilling. He now made this a defining principle of neoconservatism, three cheers being too utopian for any human venture, including capitalism. So, too, the “moral realism” he had admired in Trilling (and in Forster as well) was now identified, by himself and others, with neoconservatism, and not only with respect to domestic affairs but foreign affairs as well—as exhibited in yet another journal founded (but not edited) by him in 1985, *The National Interest*. Ten years later, an essay in the Festschrift dedicated to him was entitled “Irving Kristol’s Moral Realism.” It is fitting that that essay should have been written by the co-founder of *Enquiry*, Philip Selznick, although it is unlikely that Selznick recalled the provenance of that phrase half a century earlier.

In Kristol’s later years, he wrote less about literature, religion, and philosophy and more about politics, economics, and foreign affairs, not as separate disciplines but as parts of a whole, imbued by a common purpose and disposition. Thus he reminded economists of the political and ethical dimensions of their subject—“political economy,” as Adam Smith (himself a professor of Moral Philosophy) had termed it. He urged politicians to embrace a “new economics,” supply-side economics, which would invigorate the polity and society as well as the economy. He cautioned statesmen and foreign policy experts to be wary of the simplicities and ideologies that pervert the best-intentioned policies and subvert the national interest. And he advised all of them that the success of their endeavors depends upon an ethos, a culture, and—that enduring token of “American exceptionalism”—a religious disposition that make for a stable and decent society.

Yet even as the focus of his writings shifted, his old interests persisted. In 1984, in a symposium in *Partisan Review* on the question of how his cultural and political views had changed in the past decades, he recalled the problem that had always vexed that journal: how to reconcile its radical or liberal politics with an admiration for modernist literature that was often politically reactionary (most notably in the case of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound). He himself had no such problem. His cultural views, he assured his old friends, had evolved in happy congruence with his political views.

Meanwhile, for myself, I have reached certain conclusions: that Jane Austen is a greater novelist than Proust or Joyce; that Raphael is a greater painter

than Picasso; that T. S. Eliot's later, Christian poetry is much superior to his earlier; that C. S. Lewis is a finer literary and cultural critic than Edmund Wilson; that Aristotle is more worthy of careful study than Marx; that we have more to learn from Tocqueville than from Max Weber; that Adam Smith makes a lot more economic sense than any economist since; that the Founding Fathers had a better understanding of democracy than any political scientist since; that. . . . Well, enough. As I said at the outset, I have become conservative, and whatever ambiguities attach to that term, it should be obvious what it does *not* mean.

He might have recalled, as he did in his memoir, a remark by Leo Strauss: that a young man might think Dostoyevsky the greatest novelist, but in maturity he should give that plaudit to Jane Austen.

\* \* \*

The title of this volume, *The Neoconservative Persuasion*, comes with the authority of the author, who used it as the title of his last essay on the subject in 2003. He then referred in passing to a book he had reviewed almost half a century earlier, *The Jacksonian Persuasion*, by the historian (and his good friend) Marvin Meyers. The final paragraph of that review has a special pertinence to his own work.

The word "persuasion," which he [Meyers] defines as "a half-formulated moral perspective involving emotional commitment," hits off exactly the strange destiny of ideas in American politics. Parties do not have anything so formal as an ideology, but they do—and must—profess something more explicit than a general ethos. "Persuasion" is a most apt term for what in fact issues from this predicament.

"Persuasion" is also a "most apt term" for neoconservatism. If neoconservatism is not, as Kristol repeatedly insisted, a movement or an ideology, let alone a party, it is something more—a "moral perspective" deriving from a broad spectrum of ideas, beliefs, and sentiments that inform politics, to be sure, but also culture, religion, economics, and much else. (The cover of a pamphlet of his much-reprinted essay "Adam Smith and the Spirit of Capitalism" bears his handwritten notation, "The Bourgeois Persuasion," an allusion to the ethical as well as economic dimension of Smith's political economy.) Over the years he used other terms to characterize neoconservatism: "imagination," "disposition," "tendency," "impulse," "cast of mind," "spirit," even "in-

stinct.” The Festschrift published in 1995 on the occasion of his seventy-fifth birthday bears the title *The Neoconservative Imagination*. But finally he himself settled on “persuasion.”

Much has been made of the consistency of tone in his writings—bold and speculative but never dogmatic or academic, always personal, witty, ironic. That tone is not only a matter of style; it suggests a distinctive intellectual sensibility—skeptical, commonsensible, eclectic, and at the same time strong-minded and hard-headed. It is a double-edged scalpel that he wielded against the “terrible simplifiers” of his generation, the utopians of the Left and the dogmatists of the Right, both of whom failed to appreciate the complicated realities of human nature and social action—realities, he insisted, that had to be confronted honestly and boldly.

From the many hundreds of uncollected essays by Irving Kristol, I have selected about fifty. (The only one that has previously appeared is “An Autobiographical Memoir” from his last volume.) Divided topically, they reflect the many subjects that engaged him in his long and productive career. They also reflect the free-flowing quality of his mind, one theme suggesting another, so that some of the essays could have been assigned to more than one category. Within each category, the essays are in chronological order, showing the evolution of his thought—or, as often as not, the consistency of his thought over so long a period of time.

The essays speak for themselves. If anything more needs saying, by way of background or explication, he himself has said it in the memoirs reprinted in this volume. (The only changes are in punctuation, capitalization, and paragraphing, which often depended upon the whim of the editors of the journals in which the essays appeared.) The bibliography provides further documentation of his range of interests and vitality of mind. And the eulogy prefacing this volume, delivered at the funeral service by our son, William Kristol, expresses the sentiments of so many after his death who paid tribute to a man whose influence in the lives of young people was as memorable as his contribution to the political and intellectual life of his times.

Gertrude Himmelfarb

December 2010

# ENQUIRY

*A Journal of Independent  
Radical Thought*

NOVEMBER, 1942

WHERE WE STAND

Editorial Statement

PERSPECTIVE OF LEFTIST POLITICS

Lillian Symes

THE DILEMMA OF SOCIAL IDEALISM

Phillip Selznick

TOWARD A SCIENTIFIC RADICALISM

Gertrude Jaeger

UP FOR COMMENT . . . .

AUDEN: THE QUALITY OF DOUBT

William Ferry

Vol. I, No. 1

Ten Cents



88

I

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IN THE  
BEGINNING...

*Enquiry*

# Auden

## *The Quality of Doubt*

*The Double Man* has been treated with consideration by the majority of reviewers. These registered their approval of the expressed religiosity of tone, the inward searching doubts concerning the viability of a humane revolutionary program, the bursting bubble of “clever hopes” expiring at the end of a “low, dishonest decade.” A congenial attitude was evident toward the feeling that

*All our reflections turn about  
A common meditative norm,  
Retrenchment, Sacrifice, Reform.*

Be that as it may; we leave their motives and motivations unquestioned, desiring, rather, to explore certain political problems, incidental to the poetry as such yet relevant to the attitudes expressed therein.

Auden is certainly one of those “whose works are in better taste than their lives.” His early verse, ideologically viewed, was brashly positive, didactic, clever, facile, and possessed of a nasty Stalinist bent. The undercurrent of questioning uncertainty, often stilled but always there, became dominant only late in the decade. A “New Year’s Letter” (1941), a part of this latest volume [*The Double Man*], is the organized end product of these growing doubts, and its moral subtlety, receptivity, and sensitivity is close to brilliant. The bitterly acquired political wisdom of a generation seems to flourish in the pen and stagnate in the poet. Of course, being poetry, the problem is only stated; but a good statement is half a solution.

It is not the need for specific moral decisions by the poet which so troubles the verse, as it is the feeling that the basic issues of morality itself are undefined, immediate, and pressing—a common enough revelation of the age’s moral va-

cancy. Combined with this is the guilt-fear of the individual for the crimes committed around him, the responsibility of even passive contribution, the warping of ideals by greed and egoism, which leads Auden to say:

*Our million individual deeds  
Omissions, vanities, and creeds,  
Put through the statistician's hoop  
The gross behavior of a group.*

To put the issue more bluntly than the poetry permits, what is being advanced is a working concept of original sin, a concept which gives the conditions of idealism and forces to the fore unremittingly a sharp, cynical analysis of self and others, ends and means. Rather than hypostasizing goodness as a quality which by hypothesis some men must possess, let it be remembered that men in all ways seem better than they are. Those who see the world of the future making tremendous forward leaps through the agency of technology and the applied social sciences, or who believe in a complete spiritual regeneration of a majority of men, are deceiving themselves. The permeating fact of evil, both past and present, speaks differently.

Scientists and nonscientists alike live on an inclined plane of credulity, and it is given to no one type of mind to discern the totality of truth. The science of politics, consistent with the nature of science as such, is a process of abstraction, simplification, and logical exclusion. It strives for the quantitative and minimizes the qualitative. The partial efficacy of all this brooks no denial, but its partiality must be insisted upon. A systematic rationality of action is encouraged which is often a false rationality of unity, simplicity, and generality. As a counterweight to this exists the insight of ontology (to borrow a term made current by John Crowe Ransom), which attempts to see things wholly, qualitatively, in their full particularity. It is contemplative, not utilitarian, and its medium is the arts, not the sciences. The three main weapons of the ontological view are tragedy, irony, and comedy. Tragedy offers a realism of its own against ingenuous enterprise, warning against "excessive expectations as to the prosperity of structures." Irony exists when the spectator is given an insight superior to that of the actor. When spectator and actor are one, this insight is that of the "double man," inducing humility and possibly a certain measure of self-contempt. The comic corrective ("sense of humor") is a reaction against human acts being determined by abstract principles and is essentially critical of programs. It is these constituents of the double or ontological view which



engender the quality of doubt, respect the headlines and loss of balance as the tax which all action must pay, and force a constant reference of means (abstract political principles) to ends (concrete colorful humanity).

The juxtaposition of personal and impersonal, private existence and public politics, its ensuing dialectic self-analysis with its confession that truth is equivocal—all of this is a vitiation of animal confidence and vigor, a symptom of approaching age. It cannot be erased by a repetitive moral earnestness which serves only to blur the perception of the actual. The crisis in conscience is deep and enduring and any renewal of heart will have to accept it as a fellow-traveler. On the other hand, to elevate doubt into a political program is distinctly impracticable, having the common consequences of accepting the status quo as a sure good contrasted to all kinds of future imaginable evils. Many have advanced from doubt to negation, decrying political movements *in toto* as destined to fall short of their ends. Even though these prophecies bear fruit, they are irrelevant to an individual's participation, which is based primarily upon moral considerations. Whether a man lives or dies in vain can never be measured by the collective activity of his fellows. It is only seen in the way he faces his problems, in the way he resolves his inner conflicts, in his deliberate exercise of choice. And the integrity of the intellect will always add its admonition in the face of chaos:

But ideas can be true although men die.

1942

# A Christian Experiment

To Thomas Mann's dictum: "In our time the destiny of man presents its meaning in political terms," we may add the observation, drawn from current intellectual trends, that our political destiny is on the way to being formulated in religious terms. Which may be a more or less natural reversion. It is a comparatively recent phenomenon, perhaps peculiar to our modern Western civilization, that masses of men should work, think, and agitate for a reconstruction of society according to some ideal of social perfection. It belongs to the order of religion rather than politics, as this latter was previously understood. It finds its parallel in extremist religious movements such as the Anabaptists in Luther's Germany and the Levellers in Cromwell's England. With the estrangement of religion from crucial social activities political ethics becomes secular in origin and intent. The revolutionists are driven by the recognition that actual society is an embodiment of force and fraud, organized for no ideal end. As remedy after remedy fails, the deeper grows the dissatisfaction. When disillusionment becomes complete, all that is most vital in the moral life of the time alienates itself from the political life of society and from the service of the state as something unworthy and unclean. Piecemeal reconstruction is deemed hopeless, and men return to the more enduring vision of universal pervasive principles which absorb all problems and solutions into a single expanded perspective.

If this general analysis were to be applied point by point to Mr. Silone, it would be found to be accurate and even indispensable to understanding, but insufficient. For we are not dealing with a man who bends to a pattern but with one of singular gifts, the outstanding of which is integrity. Integrity signifies an honest, thorough, and capable analysis of one's own views, a prerequisite for which is a sufficient sum of intellectual distinction, so that it would be presumptuous to dismiss his theories as mere reflection. Rather are they positive contributions to policy, to be distilled and evaluated. And of course there is the novel *qua* novel.

*The Seed Beneath the Snow* completes the intellectual evolution of Pietro Spina from revolutionary Marxian politics to a libertarian revolutionary Christianity, begun in *Bread and Wine*. There is little narrative since the novel is demonstrative in purpose, contrasting Spina's way of life with that of the others, elaborating the doctrinal meanings in innumerable dialogues, and with a few simple images proposing the silent ideas. The philosophy is not new and was stated succinctly by Thoreau when he said: "Action from principle, the perception and performance of right, changes things and relations; it is essentially revolutionary, and does not consist wholly with anything which was." Action is to be based solely on principles, without adaptation or compromise. The basic principles are the maxim "Do unto others as you would have them do to you," the regenerative power of love, humility, sacrifice of worldly vanities, and a devotion to the poor and oppressed. The central symbol is taken to be Christ's sacrifice, an act of "madness," seditious to law and order. The portrayal of Spina in this latest novel is supposed to indicate what such a life would look like in practice.

As a novel it is a poor performance, and since a substantial amount of his previous stylistic vigor is present, the dominating orientation seems to be to blame. A passionate approach to ethical behavior lacking a set of rigid categories (such as Dostoyevsky often possessed) is diffused into romantic sentiment. Much of what Spina says and does is, by the universal canons of experience, downright silly, i.e., reveals an incongruity of cause and effect, an irrelevancy in act and feeling. In a "naturalistic" portrait this defect is fatal. His relations with the deaf-mute Infante possess all the sentimentality of Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* without the dramatic force; the same is even more true of the ending. Silone's desire to pierce the hard shell which separates men is to be appreciated. But in actual life the "inner man" always turns out to have a shell of his own. When transparent purity is attained, as is the case with Spina, genuine human personality is extinguished. The failure of the image of Spina, the saint, may be contrasted with the convincing and impressive presentation of Don Severino, the saint "manqué," the latter being a more universal, poignant, and significant condition.

There is, too, a vitiating "anti-theoretical" bias, revealed plainly in the repeated scorn of political rhetoric as a technique of obfuscation. The goods of life, especially love between all living creatures, are seen as immediately present in existence, yearning to be grasped in action. Discourse and dialectic are idle, and only emotional affirmatives are justified. Contrasting this Silone with the earlier Malraux is suggestive. In Silone, confusion commences in the concrete, in Malraux, in the abstract. Silone insists that love and sacrifice are only fruitful if applied to living creatures and denied to symbols and programs, which, because of

their abstract nature, have a somewhat Satanic power. Malraux's characters are driven into a fury of action by the overriding power of some symbolic view of man's fate. While Malraux's characters can never develop because of the bounds within which they were conceived, Silone's cannot be created but reside somewhere within the supposed intrinsic gravitational force of his superb intentions.

The fundamental flaw is an excess of pride, a confidence in one's own revolutionary innocence. Silone would have us "build on a new foundation, start with simple hay and clear water and then feel our way forward." But it is not so easy; there are few in our time who have sufficient naïveté of spirit to play innocent. We are born with a heritage, a long task assigned, a character imposed. It is when life is understood to be a process of redemption that its various phases are taken up in turn, without undue haste. The image of Pietro Spina fails because such a vision cannot be conceived willfully and hurriedly, no matter how provocative the stimulus. There is no simple formula that can be employed in the contravention of corruption and "provisional living"; the adaptation to the nausea of daily life, sustained by some vague anticipation, is not merely a mistaken notion which can be dissipated by adherence to principles. Proud, too, is the blinding illumination of the Good. In this novel of intense moral feeling we do not find what we would most expect, an acute awareness of subsistent evil. The characters and images are either representations of the Good or background for such representations. Even Dona Faustina, at first a seemingly careless woman, concludes with a radiance of virginal purity.

Towards the end of the novel there is a dialogue between Faustina and Spina:

"These are the rules, Pietro; we must have patience; we didn't invent the game, but we must play it, as hounds or hares, one or the other."

"And what if a man should refuse to be either a hound or a hare, Faustina?"

"Then he is no part of civilized society and he must run away; in short he must be a hare."

Mr. Silone is attempting an experiment in a Christian morality which avoids these disjunctives. The experiment will fail. In the meantime we must wait upon the course of events, till hares become hounds, and integrity may assume its rightful political forms.

## Other People's Nerve

The January-February and March-April issues of *Partisan Review* have featured a discussion of the "New Failure of Nerve." It has been interesting, provocative reading, as could have been expected given such substantial contributors as Sidney Hook, John Dewey, Ernest Nagel, Ruth Benedict, and others. Yet it seems to me to have missed the mark somewhat, and in the case of Sidney Hook's polemic against the failure of the Left, to have committed gross and significant errors.

The trend under criticism is identified with "a rise of asceticism, of mysticism, in a sense, of pessimism; a loss of self-confidence, of hope in this life and faith in normal human efforts. . . ." It signifies a disillusionment with the method of science as a curative for human ills, and a reversion to principles of social organization and individual attitude that have usually been considered religious—the principles of myth, dogma, and prayer. This movement seems to have had a decided influence in academic circles, and insofar as it has been weakened by the *Partisan Review* counterattack all is to the good. The pietistic revival among the professors is too loudly colored with Catholic prejudices and absolutes not to have reactionary political consequences. But the deviation that is witnessed in the cases of men like Eliseo Vivas and Charles W. Morris is not amenable to such simple denunciation. And it is here that the mark is missed, for Messrs. Hook and Nagel seem to possess their own version of "original sin," the locus of which is the willful perversity of intellectuals who recalcitrantly gravitate toward non-scientific philosophies. The facile explanation, that the origin lies in the current disorganization of beliefs and institutions, contains a truth but explains nothing. Why this turning to religion by these people, who have in the past been associated with progressive ideas and movements, at this time?

It should be recognized that, whatever the status of their special theories, these "heretics" pose problems that have more than a representative psycho-

logical significance; they demonstrate an awareness of actual deficiencies and crises. They are a tribute-in-reverse to the paucity of ideals and to the synthetic idealism which has characterized the socialist movement. Their defection highlights the neglect which scientific thought has meted out to those who insist upon a larger view, a dramatic integration, of one's character, activities, and goal. Professor Nagel's logical objections to the various propositions on religion appear, from this point of view, a tour de force. Since they presuppose criteria of validity unacceptable to any religion, their cogency depends upon prior conviction. More important, the literal interpretation that such an analysis employs cannot do justice to the *import* of such ideas; to talk of "supernaturalism" is to attempt to state the moral and intellectual questions of the twentieth century in nineteenth-century categories. There are good reasons these days for pessimism and lack of confidence in human effort, and they cannot be exorcised glibly by admonishing against a "flight from responsibility." And as far as "nerve" goes, Aldous Huxley in his thoroughgoing mysticism demonstrates greater integrity than does Ruth Benedict in her fluent Stalinized liberalism.

Professor Hook's article on the "Failure of the Left" is really a separate argument in itself, having little relevance to the recrudescence of religiosity and the reaction against science. (Unless he would assert that his political views are the only scientific ones, all others suffering from a metaphysical bias somewhere along the line; but the evidence for such an imputation of arrogance is hardly sufficient.) All left-wing groups are castigated severely; indeed so burning is Professor Hook's indignation that he extends his attacks to certain groups which no one else seems to have thought of as being leftist. It does seem a bit silly to criticize *The Nation*, *New Leader*, and the American Labor Party for lacking socialist militancy; he might as well charge the night with being dark. However, it is when he inveighs against "Platonic Revolutionists" that he is most vitriolic, and it is explicit that the source of his anger is their views on World War II.

The "Platonic Revolutionists" (i.e., those with Marxian-Leninist convictions) stand indicted because their political program, which deems this war just another imperialistic conflict, is a stubbornly stupid repetition of fetishized slogans. Instead of an empirical analysis of the consequences of action, they insist upon reasoning deductively from fixed categories containing such essences as Capitalism, Socialism, Fascism, etc., all immutable and non-overlapping. In their union of fanaticism and metaphysics, they have become in Professor Hook's eyes "Lenin's Witnesses." Now, few thinkers are as admirably equipped

as Professor Hook to investigate the philosophical and political distortions occasioned by Leninist dogma; most of his past criticisms of these precepts possess knowledge and insight. But it should be evident that in this case he has allowed a general theory, guided by sentiment, to substitute for an analysis of the fact, a characteristic, ironically, of the Platonic fallacy. Any just and honest appraisal of the position of this group will reveal the following:

1. In large measure, their position is based on empirical grounds, upon the actualities of the war situation. Among these are the pronounced and implicit war aims of the contestants, the strengthening of the control of social institutions by reactionary forces, and the inability of the victory of either group to solve the decisive economic, political, and moral problems of which Fascism was a direct product.
2. As a basis for validating perspectives, they have available an invaluable fund of historical experience, and this experience includes estimates of the consequences of certain types of action for the goal of socialism. This background indicates the vulnerability of ruling classes when faced with a bloody collapse of their organization of society and the revelation of the hypocrisy of their verbal ideas. It also suggests that wars fought for selfish motives receive, in time, due recognition from the peoples, and that it is political suicide for any opposition group to identify itself, even conditionally, with such an eventual object of disgust and disillusion.
3. Inflexible dogmas need not lead to inflexible tactics. In their policy of the United Front, especially as it was applied during the Spanish Civil War, the Leninists have demonstrated great adaptability to the conditions of the fight. To present them as ideological purists in their position on war, pursuing an abstentionist path out of sheer petulance with events, is to misrepresent them. They do have a program for positive action which, whatever sense it may possess or lack in the eyes of any single person, does fulfill the requirements for a set of meaningful proposals.
4. Fanaticism is an evil-sounding word. If, however, it is realized that this is what its defenders deem a moral attitude of intransigent socialist internationalism, one's reaction is not so easily channelized.

"But what," Professor Hook would ask, "does this have to do with licking Hitler?" In this near-hysterical insistence upon the pressing military danger and in the complaint, "mere theoretical carping," we recognize not only a common academic reaction to events, but also an ominously familiar ideological weapon. It is the exact technique of the Communist-Liberal coalition during

the days of the Popular Front and collective security. One element in the situation is seized from its context as the receptacle of all political significance, and crucial political disagreements based on a broader perspective than "licking the villain" are condemned as malicious and irresponsible criticism. The following, by Professor Hook, is an example of this method: "If Hitler wins, democratic socialism has no future. But at least [with an Allied victory] it has a chance! It is the failure to grasp this simple piece of wisdom which marks the political insanity of infantile leftism." Yet if this is wisdom in 1943, why did Professor Hook brand it as stupidity in 1939? Any real alternative in terms of international working-class solidarity was as firmly excluded then as it is presumed to be now. What is involved here is more than a programmatic difference of opinion. There is revealed more nearly a change in moral attitude ("nerve") than an understandable intellectual disagreement. When the attainment of an ideal is conceived as a product of day-to-day pressures, as among the Stalinists and social-democrats, rather than as a planned relation between an end-in-view and the conditions of action, then idealism becomes identical with opportunism. This is not only morally undesirable but also politically futile, for the consequences of Professor Hook's program for the defeat of Hitler would be such as to vitiate his ultimate socialist goal.

His program is avowedly an acceptance from the Left of the "Clemenceau thesis," i.e., urging unsparing prosecution of the war and denouncing the ineptness and ineffectiveness of the war effort as currently managed. The labor organizations should be the organizers of victory. In the very interest of a military victory over Hitler, the war must be fought in a total democratic fashion, regardless of the restrictions of capitalist property relations. It is a program of critical political support along with complete military participation.

In selecting the "Clemenceau thesis" as his key strategic insight, Professor Hook has committed a blunder; it holds water neither as a historical analogy nor as a practicable method. The "Clemenceau thesis" was the result of a struggle *within a class*, a dispute over method, not over goal. The war aims of its proponents and opponents were identical, and one of the dominant aims was the preservation of capitalist property rights. If the labor movement were to adopt Professor Hook's convictions, it would have one of two possible results, both totally contrary to original intentions: there would be open civil war, or complete capitulation on the part of labor. (Peaceful capitulation by business interests is inconceivable.) When political criticism insists upon any fundamental change in the economic system, the military effort is bound to be adversely affected. Such demands would bring to the point of crisis latent class antagonisms. It is certain that the conservatives, possessing, on the whole,



more guts and wisdom than the Hook variety of socialist, will be adamant in resisting concessions, despite probable ruinous effects at the fronts (viz., Churchill's treatment of India). They are not committed to *any* war against Hitler, but solely to one controlled by them in their own interests. So the socialist critics will retreat in the interests of "unity," and the final scene will have Professor Hook mimicking Harold J. Laski in public bewailing and prayer, and still dreaming of an honest-to-goodness war against Hitler, while the forces of reaction consolidate their grip.

The one glaring omission in the article that gives the show away is—Japan. There is no mention of the war in the Far East, only the battle against Hitler! This incredible state of affairs demonstrates that Platonism, or acting on the basis of hypostatized abstractions, is not solely a sectarian malady. The war in Asia clarifies brutally the activating war aims of the United States, Britain, and the Netherlands as far as the vital questions of empire and freedom are concerned. Professor Hook busies himself with an abstract war against Hitler rather than handle the less attractive reality of a completely reactionary crusade against "those yellow b——s."

It's always the other fellow's nerve.

1943

# James Burnham's *The Machiavellians*

*He would have men prepared to encounter the worst of men: and therefore he resembles him to a man driving a flock of sheep, into a corner, and did there take out their teeth, and instead, gave each of them a set of wolves teeth so that, whereas one shepherd was able to drive a whole flock, now each sheep had need of a particular shepherd, and all little enough.*

**“The Vindication of That Hero of Political Learning,  
Nicholas Machiavel” by James Boevey  
(quoted in Wyndham Lewis, *The Art of Being Ruled*)**

The atmosphere, these days, contains a good deal more of what is called “realism” than is usually considered desirable for healthy progress. In some measure this is a natural symptom of the ebb of insurgent liberal-socialist thought. The prospects of large-scale reform having been largely dissipated in the past two decades, a new starting point, with a more stringent perspective, is sought. The war, too, is taking its toll, withering at contact all attractive formulations as to its ultimate purpose, so that alternatives are constantly being narrowed between greater evils and slightly lesser ones. The Union for Democratic Action has now progressed to that point where the delineation of the future balance of power in Europe is a prime programmatic concern, while Ely Culbertson’s “practical” nonsense is mouthed by leftist politicians, prelude to a new Congress of Vienna. Illusions are discarded, political self-consciousness prevails, or so it seems. But where do political illusions begin, and where end? What is the locus of realism, and what are its lessons?

James Burnham has worked out a cogent argument which has this in its favor. It states in general form the conditions of all effective social action, rather

than being circumscribed within a particular dilemma. That he has been so vigorously denounced by the liberal press indicates that they do not feel at ease within such an inclusive structure, preferring to "stick to the facts." The more sophisticated critics say that problems of power are always specific, which is true; and that there is no general problem of power, which is false and a non sequitur. What in another context might be welcomed as a cautious disavowal of sweeping generalizations is clearly in this case an unwillingness to discuss the premises of their program. For Burnham deals in "fundamentals," and only those who have given no hostages to the powers-that-be can take a hand in such a radical game. (This applies to the Marxian groups too. Here, loyalty to an *a priori* system, the cultivation of which has taken a century of strenuous effort, performs the same role that the political commitments of the past ten years do for the New Dealers.)

*The Machiavellians* summarizes the relevant writings of Machiavelli, Mosca, Sorel, Michels, and Pareto, and from their points of tangency sets up a theory of political behavior that has provocative implications for current discussion. It is to be feared, however, that the substantial contribution of the book will be neglected because of certain shortcomings in method and tone. They are limitations of a glib, schematic, intemperate intellect, with an inexplicable Marxian bias towards history. To dub the Machiavellians "defenders of freedom" for erecting valid hypotheses concerning social conduct is to give to truth a partisan flavor of which it is innocent; a moral concern must be demonstrated. Even John Calhoun could write, while defending slavocracy: "Power can only be resisted by power and tendency by tendency. . . . Those who exercise power and those subject to its exercise—the rulers and the ruled—stand in antagonistic relations to each other." There is a naïve positivism at work, and an easy misuse of science, in the sheer contradiction established between blunt truth and dishonest myth, which ignores the symbolic quality of ideals as they find expression in myths. Myths need not lie (though some do), nor are all myths equally meaningful, nor do all myths deceive rather than enlighten. Myth is a mode of expression, not a constituent of that which is expressed. Again, Burnham reduces goals to immediately ascertainable possibilities presented spontaneously by the situation. A more careful statement would recognize that the selection of specific ends is vitally influenced by more distant and less articulate ends, in the absence of which evidence is but brute data.

From an extended analysis of Dante's *De Monarchia*, Burnham draws a crucial distinction between the formal and real meaning of a political philosophy or program. The purpose is to raise to the level of academic thought

the dearly bought insight of ordinary men that the words of politicians are not to be taken at their face value. The formal is the literal, dictionary meaning; the real meaning, which is the theory in action, is discovered only in the context of social life. Secretary of State Hull, for instance, preaches concord among nations (after the war). When the words are translated into the workings of the State Department they signify American commercial and political dominance in world affairs. Even if this latter were not Mr. Hull's intent at all, it is the objective, operational import of his program, for where intent is not translated into effect its existence is conjectural, and conversely, it is only in overt demeanor that intent can be evaluated. A more obvious case is the Soviet Constitution, which guarantees freedom of speech and assembly, and means saleable propaganda to the gullible. The British Labor Party has agreed to an electoral truce to ensure a united effective struggle against Hitlerism; the meaning of this tactic is the presence in the cabinet of labor leaders enforcing a conservative program in domestic, foreign, and military affairs. The manner in which the formal program distorts and disguises the real program not only inspires self-deception (the opposition is rarely misled), but also renders the real meaning recalcitrant to deliberate control. The Bolshevik theory of the dictatorship of the working class turned out to mean the dictatorship of the central committee, to the surprise and horror of many adherents. By the time the discovery was made the situation had already been determined.

Burnham's handling of this question is such as to invite a speedy objection. He insists that the theories of the Machiavellians are scientific in that the formal and real meanings coincide. That is to say, the literal meaning of their propositions exemplifies the concrete workings of their subject matter; the world of words does not pervert the world of things. But since his test case, Dante's tract, is a gaudy metaphysical apologia for a self-centered politics, Burnham seems to permit himself the liberty of imputing Dante's motives. At which point his censors are prompt to point to the supposed personal fascistic leanings of Sorel, Mosca, and Pareto, while rejecting their theories as a reactionary cloak. Now it should be evident that to raise such a psychological issue is both unwarranted and undesirable. The relations between men and their words can be amazingly complex, as the social sciences have only recently begun to appreciate in their study of semantics and ideology. Moreover, assertions about motivation are not open to the same rigors of proof as is the case of an inferred meaning constructed by juxtaposing word against fact. Broadly speaking, the hypotheses of, say, Michels are scientific, while those of Dante are not, for the same considerations that would apply to conflicting

formulas in chemistry and physics: when subject to observation and experiment they fulfill the conditions of true statements.

The distinction between formal and real meaning once having been made, its function in Machiavellian theory becomes clear. The formal antitheses which set apart different parties are shown to issue from a lowest common denominator, their direction towards the achievement and retention of power. "If our interest is in man as he is on this earth, so far, as we can learn from the facts of history and experience, we must conclude that he has no natural aspiration for peace and harmony, he does not form states in order to achieve an ideally good society, nor does he accept mutual organization to secure maximum social welfare. But men, and groups of men, do, by various means, struggle among themselves for relative increases, in power and privilege." This seems to say a good deal about "human nature" and possesses a grand air of "defeatism"; as a result it has been discussed in just such terms. Readers with a more generous and less sectarian vision would have politely segregated this personal emphasis from the impersonal core of the theme, even if such generosity deprived them of an easy target. That history is a "struggle for power" is an elementary, even trite, description; all parties organized for certain ends find it imperative to wield coercive authority. But beyond this commonplace can be noted a more singular trend: power slowly takes priority over the professed goals as an end-in-itself, and the closer to the effective exercise of power one is, the higher is its priority rating. This can be explained in part by the internal consequences of organization noted below, and in part by the confidence of participants, especially leaders, in the rightness of the cause for which they have sacrificed so much, which urges them to gloss over "expedient" measures. Any less intransigent attitude would be intolerable to people of such extreme concentration and seriousness. In most cases the party must either hold power, regardless of whether or not its methods contravene the formal program, or abdicate in favor of the hated enemy. When the choice is between power at any price and political suicide, the answer can be readily imagined; even if this disjunction were fictitious, the heated conflict of extreme viewpoints would lend it an aura of reality. Struggles for principles come to mean struggles for power.

It might be well to repeat: motives propose but the exigencies of practical action dispose. It is silly to deny that there are individuals so imbued with disinterested idealism that they are willing to forgo the prerogatives of power when these negate the ideals. But it can be safely said: (1) they are few and far between, (2) they repudiate the most potent means of exerting an enduring influence, and (3) when such individuals enter into a group in order to further

these ideals, the attributes of the group will not be those of the individual. The history of the Franciscan Order, surely the most ambitious attempt to break through this circle, in its evolution from complete abnegation to ruthless regimentation, is instructive on this score. Illustrative, too, is the experience of the Spanish Anarchists, who, scornful of political power, awoke one day to find themselves burdened with Anarchist ministers in the Republican cabinet. Just as the assumption of "economic man" is not necessary to explain the workings of a price economy, so any concept of "power lust" is extrinsic to the above generalizations. The question is not one of faith or lack of faith in human nature, but of which specific faiths are justified by the way men act in defined situations.

The general laws of organization expounded by Michels are too well known to require elaboration. Burnham puts it succinctly: "Social life cannot dispense with organization. The mechanical, technical, psychological, and cultural conditions of organization require leadership, and guarantee that the leaders rather than the mass shall exercise control." This "iron law of oligarchy" reinforces the pursuit of power-ends at the expense of the formal ends. The life of leadership is one of incessant effort to build the party, with a consequent identification of the interests of the leaders with those of "their" party. Through a process of self-dedication the offices of leadership become synonymous with the highest welfare of the membership, not to speak of humanity, civilization, et al. Their retention of control is vindicated as a defense of the traditional faith and an assurance of future victory. A struggle for leadership is, above all, a struggle for power between opposing elites—the "ins" and the "outs." Programmatic differences assume the role of vehicles which represent and sanction the rebellious intent. Even if the conflict were originally incited by an ideological disagreement, the need of articulating these differences would involve a campaign for organizational preeminence whose demands would take precedence.

What is the significance of this disparity between professed and operational aims in politics? Three pertinent implications may be suggested here:

1. Utopian political doctrines are to be deplored, and not only because of their unattainability; in practice they will have worse effects than those more conservative and cautious. The example which Burnham treats convincingly is the liberal aim of democracy, defined as self-government by the people. While, as an ideal, this is irreproachable, as a dependable, practicable precept it is delusive; the formula today means strengthening the trend toward Bonapartism or Caesarism. The suffrage

mechanism which realizes the principle is fetishized into an efficient guarantor, while the developed techniques of mass control warp elections into plebiscites for the confirmation of despotism. More important, the assumption of a unanimity of interest between the ruler as the representative and the ruled as the represented is grist for the totalitarian mill. The socialist ideal of a "classless society" can be judged similarly defective when one realizes that (a) its formal meaning is so vague and ambiguous that whatever steps are taken can be subsequently interpreted as consistent with it, (b) this inability to delimit means and procedures provides a convenient cloak for unscrupulous careerists, (c) it is psychologically and historically intertwined with a preference for a completely collectivized society, and (d) it supposes that the question of power can be definitively settled, which is as good an excuse as any ruling elite can wish for suppressing dissidents as disruptive and anarchic.

2. Democracy must be defined in terms like Mosca's "liberty" and "juridical defense." This means a set of impersonal restrictions upon those in power and protection by law and the courts of the familiar democratic rights. It emphasizes government by due process rather than by the unchecked rule of self-titled delegates of History or the Workers, and is summed up in the right of organized opposition and subversion.
3. But laws and constitutions may easily be violated in practice while respected in speech. Further: "No theory, no promises, no morality, no amount of good will, no religion will restrain power. Neither priests nor soldiers, neither labor leaders nor business men, neither bureaucrats nor feudal lords will differ from each other in the basic use they will seek to make of power. . . . Only power restrains power." Freedom is the product of the conflict of social forces, not of their unity and harmony. (Most socialists would agree that this holds for all societies save a socialist one, whose exceptional status is transcendently assured.) It is only through such freedom that the maximum of self-government is achieved. Opposing elites will make promises to masses in exchange for support, and if victorious, must keep some of them. The struggle stimulates the growth of new demands among the non-elite and encourages new pretenders to rise. "The masses, blocked by the iron law of oligarchy from directly and deliberately ruling themselves, are able to limit and control, indirectly, the power of their rulers. The myth of self-government is translated into a measure of reality by the fact of freedom."

There are many, including Burnham, who feel that recognition of these aspects of group action inevitably inhibits socialist activity as we have come to understand it. I feel that this flows from a confusion of perspectives. A general sociological outlook is not relevant in the same degree to all problems. Machiavellian theory is an indispensable analytical tool, even on its present abstract and elementary level; but it modifies only in small part traditional revolutionary socialist strategy. The problems posed by a declining capitalism may now appear more intricate and complex, but this should have been expected. The immense significance of Burnham's approach is potential; we can ignore it only at the risk of being disarmed by the future course of events.

1943



# The Moral Critic

It was in the *Partisan Review* of September-October 1940 that Mr. Trilling publicly announced his strategy. Discussing T. S. Eliot's "Idea of a Christian Society" in the light of Matthew Arnold's dictum that criticism "must be apt to study and praise elements that for the fullness of spiritual perfection are wanted," he subjected the liberal-socialist ideology to a vigorous and pointed chiding. His subsequent writings might be viewed as a search for those "elements which are wanted," a brilliant and moral sustained, if sometimes impatient, exploration of the complexities of perfection and of the paths thereto.

In fact, and this is our special interest, in that very same article Mr. Trilling incorporated two distinct chidings. He was angry with the Left for having surrendered its traditional moral vision, and at the same time accused it of allowing this vision to blind it to the true principles of humanism. It was all done with such noble vehemence as to blur any hint of incompatibility. (It is certain that Mr. Trilling felt none.) Yet, the two tendencies are interesting and important in themselves, and have a larger reference which makes them worthy of attention.

The distinguishing feature of modern radical thought, wrote Mr. Trilling, "is that a consideration of means has taken priority over the consideration of ends . . . immediate ends have become more important than ultimate ends." The noteworthy quality of Eliot, contrasted to Trotsky, is his belief in morality as an end, not simply as a means, as an ever-present shaping ideal, not a set of prescribed tactics. Moral politics rather than historical criteria are seen as the measure of action: "Politics is to be judged by what it does for the moral perfection rather than the physical easement of man." The sense of immanent moral revolution, so profoundly developed in the eighteenth century, the concern with the potentialities of the individual and the race, have lost their vitality. Instead of asking, "What shall man become," socialists have concen-

trated exclusively upon maneuvering for temporary advantages in the contest for influence and power.

"Lenin," wrote Mr. Trilling, "gave us the cue when, at the end of *The State and Revolution*, he told us that we might well postpone the problem of what man is to become until such time as he might become anything he chose." One understands how such a thing gets said; but one understands, too, that saying it does not make a suspension of choice: it is a choice already made and the making of it was what gave certain people the right to wonder whether the ethics and culture of communism were anything else than the extension of the ethics and culture of the bourgeois business world. For many years the hero of our moral myth was that Worker-and-Peasant who smiled from the covers of *Soviet Russia Today*, simple, industrious, literate—and grateful. Whether or not people like him actually existed is hard to say; one suspects not and hopes not; but he was what his leaders and the radical intellectuals were glad to propagate as a moral ideal; that probably factitious Worker was the moral maximum which the preoccupation with immediate ends could accommodate.

This critique of radicalism partakes of the normal religio-ethical tone so consistently set forth by men like Maritain, Niebuhr, Dawson. It breaks with secularized politics, with politics, as one writer has called it, as an "independent art in an imperfect world," and insists that politics is but a branch of that broad science of ethics which derives from and is orientated towards the Good. In a sweep of revulsion from the interminably sordid conflict of interests it cries for social action whose goals are dictated by the fixed ethical imagination, not the fluid criteria of expediency; whose motivation is disinterested devotion, not interested gain; whose present status reflects, however crookedly, that image which is ideal. Such an appeal cannot help but be effective in these days when an ideal is at best a momentary, individual vision, and the raw stuff of politics is so pervasive and unyielding. It offers a way of penance and justification, all the more attractive for having so few definite programmatic implications. It stimulates the more pragmatic-minded to review their deeds in relation to their ends, and revise the one to suit the other. It encourages frank self-analysis and excites the moral faculties—two very good things.

Yet there appears in the same essay another strain of thought, destined to dominate the later writings, which, while not detracting from the fierce probity of the moralist, leads in a direction more agreeable to the workaday world. It is seen in the disparagement of radical philosophers who imply that man, in his quality, in his kind, will be wholly changed by socialism in fine ways that we cannot predict: man will be good, not as some men have been good, but